Sport Psychology Consulting in Professional Rugby Union in the United Kingdom

Abstract

This article describes my experiences of working within professional rugby union in South Wales, United Kingdom. Initially, I locate the context of professional rugby union in the country alongside how my various subcultural understandings of the sport were obtained. After outlining my consulting philosophy developed for working in a professional rugby union context, subsequent cultural challenges for practitioners working in the sport are then explored, together with example strategies used to account for such cultural considerations. I conclude by reflecting upon the importance of practitioners possessing and developing contextual intelligence and cultural competency to work effectively in high performance environments.

Keywords: Professional sport, rugby union, negative halo, mental skills, cultural awareness

Sport Psychology Consulting in Professional Rugby Union in the United Kingdom

The goal of this paper is to describe my experiences of working within male professional rugby union in the South Wales region of the United Kingdom. In line with the cultural sport psychology perspective, which emphasizes that each context necessitates its own consulting approach (Schinke, McGannon, Parham, & Lane, 2012), in reflecting upon my professional practice experiences I seek to offer insight into the various cultural and subcultural surroundings I have encountered in the sport, and how these contexts have informed my subsequent consulting philosophy, both in terms of the context and the strategies adopted with the clients. To this extent the paper comprises four elements. First, I provide an overview of the sport of rugby union and how I gained an understanding of the subcultural surroundings within the professional game in South Wales, United Kingdom. Next, based upon this knowledge, I outline my personal consulting philosophy developed for practicing in this context (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004). I then explore the challenges faced in working within this culture, along with example strategies used to account for such cultural considerations. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the importance of possessing and developing contextual intelligence and cultural competency to work effectively in high performance environments.

Professional Rugby Union in South Wales and My Journey into its Culture

Rugby union is a sport that has been in existence for over 150 years and is one of the most popular contact team sports globally, played at professional, amateur and junior levels by males and females in nearly 200 countries across both Hemispheres (http://www.worldrugby.org). The sport's flagship event, the Rugby World Cup, a quadrennial international rugby union competition, attracts a global TV audience of over 5 billion viewers, with the New Zealand All Blacks the current holders. Through its longstanding amateur status, the sport also has a rich tradition of promoting positive cultural and societal values including teamwork, discipline, respect, enjoyment and sportsmanship.

Despite the presence of coaches and medical staff in rugby union since the mid to late 1960s, a significant change in the culture of the sport occurred with the introduction of professionalism in 1995 (the game had been played under a strictly amateur ethos until then). Increased investment directed into preparing teams for performance resulted in a growth of sports science and medicine support, and increased psychological service provision to national governing bodies and teams. Today, although not commonplace, most professional and elite international teams will have worked with, or had access to, some form of sport psychology consultant (SPC) or associated service. The New Zealand All Blacks, for example, the most successful international rugby union team in history (win percentage of >75%), have employed Gilbert Enoka as their resident SPC for over a decade.

In Wales, rugby union is the national sport and considered a large part of the national culture. For a small country of 3 million people, Wales has a proud history of producing successful teams, being consistently in the top 8 of the World rugby union rankings and having won the annual premier northern hemisphere competition, the European Rugby 6 Nations tournament, on 38 occasions out of the 120 years it has been held. Such is the passion for the sport, when the team plays a test match, it is a significant cultural event, and the entire Nation stops to watch.

In terms of my understanding of rugby union and its context and subculture, this has been acquired through my sustained engagement with the sport itself. As a sport psychology consultant (SPC) I have been working in the sport of professional rugby union for over a decade. At the time I began working with the professional team in question I had been involved in the game in Wales in some aspect as a player or coach for over 20 years, so I was acutely "embedded" in the culture of the sport. I started playing the game from a young age (5 years old), went on to gain junior international representative honors, and then play at a semi-professional level. During my Masters and Doctoral training, specializing in stress and performance in sport, I also combined both playing and coaching rugby union (at collegiate level) in South Wales alongside my academic duties.

While these experiences served to provide me with a level of insight into the workings of the sport, I feel my cultural understanding only became fully "enlightened" when I undertook my professional training and supervision as a SPC. Hours of engaging in reflective practice upon my interactions with clients helped to raise my self-awareness regarding my background and experiences within my own sport, subsequently helping me to develop my practitioner experiential knowledge (cf. Anderson, Knowles, & Gilbourne, 2004) and sharpen my cultural understanding of the sport or organization that I was providing support for.

Allied to this "lived" experience of the sport in shaping my cultural understanding, I also had a longstanding academic interest in the social psychology of teams, which resonated strongly in relation to my experiences in rugby union. The origins of this interest can be traced back to my undergraduate days and the discovery of Donelson R. Forsyth's 1990 text on group dynamics. Thereafter, I sought to digest as much literature on the topic as possible in order to understand what made rugby union teams function and how this knowledge could be used by practitioners to work to enhance a team's performance. My subsequent efforts as a neophyte SPC working in team sports were focused on understanding and enhancing the specific dynamics of the team itself, drawing upon then at that time new approaches, such as Carron and Hausenblas' (1998) conceptual framework for the study of sport teams. However, as my experiences and understanding of working with sports and sports organizations grew I become more and more interested and focused on the psychology of the organizational environment within which teams were situated. Specifically, the roles of the individuals in this organization responsible for the creation and regulation of such high performance cultures (cf. Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Based on these more "formal" or structured learning experiences, in my subsequent work with sports organizations I have therefore sought to establish the level of contextual intelligence or understanding of how a sport organization operates (Brown, Gould, & Foster, 2005). Brown et al. (p. 54) explain contextual intelligence as not only knowing the culture and context of the specific sport setting in which the

individual operates, but also understanding the historical and philosophical evolution of the sport, as well as its formal and informal political structures such as its decision-making processes and customs, together with understanding the values and attitudes of its people at all levels of the organization.

Context-driven Personal Consulting Philosophy

Based upon my cultural understanding through playing, coaching (and studying) rugby union my "modus operandi" or approach to working in the sport has very much been one of having full (as opposed to zero) knowledge of the game. I have therefore sought to locate myself firmly as another "expert" member of the support team, or if you like an "insider", as opposed to someone from "outside" of the sport with no understanding or experience of the game itself. In this respect my philosophy has been driven by the need to integrate psychological services into the existing high performance environment as part of a multi-disciplinary team (MDT) systems-based approach (Reid, Stewart, & Thorne, 2004). This is based on the SPC being viewed, and operating as, a member of the support staff with equal status and recognition to other members such as the medical, analysis and S&C practitioners.

My day-to-day practice in the sport is in keeping with my context-specific consulting philosophy of trying to understand the environment and the culture as much as possible, and build working alliances and relationships with individuals (Tod & Andersen, 2012) through immersion in the sport and its context (cf. Bull, 1995). This begins with ensuring I have a level of visibility and presence during the working day. I try to be present at the training venue before during and after sessions, attend team briefings and staff meetings, and have a presence at the players' team recreational area. This "hi-vis" approach ensures I am able to engage in conversations with players in and around their environment and daily routines, so that conversation and discussion is easily facilitated. The players have full and busy daily training schedules, so being able to prompt them into reviewing or following up on interventions delivered is key. In this respect a lot of these initial

conversations and subsequent interventions are brief in nature (Giges & Petitpas, 2000). These initial contacts then provide the opportunity to follow up the conversations with more formal scheduled and structured sessions at times mutually convenient to the athlete or staff member. Most importantly the ability to deploy brief-contact interventions allows any pressing matters to be managed at the time "in-situ".

The hi-vis immersion approach to consulting also allows for ongoing observation of the culture professional sporting environment, and the day to day social interactions between individuals and groups, both in and away from the training, practice and competition environments. Having the capacity to observe individuals in their natural environment is an invaluable source of evidence for a SPC in numerous ways, such as getting to understand individual personality and behavioral tendencies, social networks, inter-personal skills, and of course, how players perform in competition and training in their sport. All of these strategies allow the SPC to garner further evidence with which to build robust profiles of their clients in their natural environments to validate and/or unpick the various challenges that the individuals and the organization experience. It of course also helps to further enhance the SPC's cultural competency and contextual intelligence.

Cultural Challenges to Working within the Sport

Negative halo. One of the main cultural challenges facing a SPC working within rugby union is the fact the profession does not have a long history or recognized tradition within the game. Although technical skill coaches, and medical and conditioning staff are indigenously associated with a professional rugby union team, very few teams have, or have had, a full time SPC on their payroll. Historically, this has contributed to common (mis)perceptions of sport psychologists and associated professionals who seek or have sought to work in the sport ("shrink", "head doctor", "quack" etc.). In rugby union these labels have been further reinforced by a lack of formal consideration of sport psychology in many of the National Governing Body coach education certificates and courses. Although some coach education training programs do allocate time and

attention to psychological factors related to sport performance and coaching, this tends to center around appreciation of mental skills training for players. Little consideration has been given to understanding the different ways in which SPCs practice and can be effective in helping coaches and support staff, in addition to athletes.

Taken collectively these cultural practices inherent in the sport, particularly in Wales and the United Kingdom, have contributed to a lack of understanding surrounding what SPCs are, how they function, and how they can help wellbeing and performance within a team. This has typically resulted in what has been termed a cognitive bias or negative halo effect (Linder, Brewer, Van Raalte, & De Lange, 1991) against any SPCs who attempt to work in the sport. At best, SPCs are still typically seen as the person who is there to "sort players' heads out" or be the individual to pick up the pieces when a player's "head has gone" due to injury, poor performance, de-selection or some other challenging aspect of their role. This is in keeping with the stereotypical "shrink" as opposed to "stretch" skillset that SPCs can bring to a team or organization, where a SPC is seen as there to pick up the pieces or problem solve as opposed to promoting learning, growth and performance.

The perceptions of SPC and some of the cultural practices described are not an uncommon barrier facing many SPCs entering a new sport environment, particularly male contact-based team sports (cf. Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006). In order to meet this challenge, the approach I took to gain initial access and begin building working alliances within the organization therefore was to be perceived firstly as a mental skills/performance enhancement coach, as opposed to that of a SPC. I often used the explanation with staff and players that just like athletes have coaches to work on their physical (S&C) development or technical skills (passing, tackling, etc.), my role was to work on the athlete's mental skills for performance but also be there to support in a traditional SPC role if needed. A key element in this initial attempt to gain trust and entry was an emphasis in the rhetoric I used on being "performance" focused in my work, but with the skillset to also support issues

"away from the game" if required, thereby, helping players develop their practical skills to enhance (i.e., stretch) their on-field performance, as opposed to off-field (i.e., shrink) work. Again this was very much based on avoiding/counteracting the negative halo affect surrounding the term "psychologist" and associated negative connotations with dealing with off-field problems of players. However, once working alliances were developed I then sought to offer support to deal with any off field issues players were experiencing as part of my service delivery.

Seeking to frame or situate my consultations with clients through a sport or rugby (and therefore performance) lens is particularly pertinent in the context of dealings with clients with whom I have not developed, or had time to develop, a strong working alliance or relationship. This approach is based on understanding the natural environment the players know and are most comfortable with – athletes are most at ease discussing their performance. Watching and reviewing video footage is a culturally inherent part of the professional sport, so I see this as the starting point for discussion and ask the players to go through and verbalize their performance/training footage to me. This then allows exploration of the reasons behind the performances issues, from where I then seek to examine the psychological process or contributions to these performances in more detail. This "sport" to "psychology" approach for me is not only effective in building trust and a working therapeutic alliance with the client but also provides the conditions necessary to facilitate the exploration of more sensitive off field challenges that may be experienced, allowing for more effective diagnosis and subsequent resolution of such issues.

Physicality culture. A key cultural factor inherent within rugby union is its physicality (due to the contact-based nature of the game). This has traditionally manifested itself in an "act tough" and "no pain no gain" culture whereby players (particularly in the male game) are encouraged to show no emotions, and "man up" in the face of any adversities experienced, such as injury, de-selection, and defeat (cf. Tibbert, Andersen, & Morris, 2015). This particular cultural stereotype is reinforced by the notion that the strength and conditioning (S&C) coach is very much at the

forefront of any training and preparation teams engage in. So much so that in professional teams the culture is one where they S&C coach is typically responsible for the planning and organization of weekly schedules, with head coaches planning their sessions around these physical preparation and conditioning schedules, so that the load players are exposed to and subsequent recovery time they receive is monitored and managed appropriately. This focus on a "strength" and "physical" culture has meant the sport is not traditionally one that has had exposure to, or engaged with, some of the factors related to the mental side of the game, and those commonly associated with SPC practice (e.g., helping individuals to manage expectations and emotions). In addition, the physical and technical focus is also inherent within the language and terms that are used by the players and staff within the environment.

In keeping with the physical/technical culture within the sport I look to engage in the implementation of practical sessions with athletes where possible. This is where I go onto the playing field, training ground, or gym, and undertake individual sessions with the players. Again the premise behind this strategy is seeking to build effective relationships with athletes in their natural environments where they are most comfortable. Here, I may only be merely physically assisting the client with their practice routines or training drills, such as catching, collecting and returning the balls to the throwers or kickers, but this approach provides the context with the player to discuss elements of their performance of that skill, or other aspects of their performances. Thereby, once again seeking to integrate the mental with technical, tactical and physical elements of their performance. When appropriate, this strategy also affords the player a safe and secure environment to explore any off field matters they may wish to discuss.

In both these on and off field contexts, I seek to use the language and terminology that is common and accepted in that group's culture. The language is firmly intended to be non-threatening/non-stigmatic (safe/secure) without any psychology-related connotations or overtones. For example, a meeting with a player is a "catch up" as opposed to a "consultation", "session" or

even “therapy”. With players the focus is very much on not only reviewing performance, but to evaluate learning and “take home” messages from the catch-ups. A common term I use with the players at end of our session is to identify their “work-ons”, areas of an aspect of the mental side of their performance or wellbeing that they need to target for practice and improvement. This term is one that is already widely accepted and used by players (and coaching staff), in relation to technical and physical elements of performance preparation.

The nature of high performance environments. A final cultural challenge when working as a SPC in professional rugby union, is one faced by all new staff attempting to work effectively in high performance environments, that of understanding the overall nature of the high performance environment itself. Professional sports environments by their very nature are highly demanding workplaces, where expectations are high, both of the athletes themselves and also of the coaching and support staff (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003) and rugby union is no exception. Such environments are characterized by numerous culturally-driven challenges, including non-traditional working practices, constant organizational change, and interpersonal conflict (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Wagstaff, Gilmore, & Thelwell, 2016). What exists, particularly in male professional team sport environments, is often a traditional, conservative and closed culture, resistant to change and suspicious of outsiders, where both staff and athletes can be skeptical about the value of new approaches or different regimes (Eubank, Nesti, & Cruickshank, 2014).

This apparent contradiction between a sport with a conservative and closed culture where there is frequent organizational change presents a further challenge in itself for any SPC seeking to negotiate their entry into such a sport and develop an effective context-driven philosophy. Indeed, Ravizza (1988) noted in his commentary on how to gain entry to be an effective SPC that it is not only important to build trust and credibility with players but also with the support staff, coaches and management. As discussed earlier, as sport psychology is not “part of furniture” traditionally in rugby union then it is often likely the rest of the staff will not know what a SPC does and

subsequently accept them and their workings from day one. Unlike a new S&C coach for example, an SPC is unable to gain immediate impact or credibility by visibly delivering conditioning sessions or conducting assessment of the players with testing equipment, with relatively instant feedback to all parties concerned.

A valuable strategy to work towards integration with staff by seeking to understand the cultural environment of the team is to identify the key gatekeepers who provide access to the various sub groups within the team or organization. In many instances this may be one of the coaches - often one or two will be initially more aware of SPC practice, and therefore more receptive to a SPCs efforts. In other teams it may be a member of the medical staff, such as the physiotherapist (athletic trainer). In any group of coaches and support staff in a professional team there will naturally be those who have more "empathy" towards a SPC and acknowledgement of the value they can bring to that organization. Often it is those individuals who are sensitive to the various demands the players experience, and whom in their roles required support or advice in terms of how to manage or deal with these challenges.

For me, my playing and coaching background enables me to have a continual degree of credibility with a number of members of the organization, some of whom are gatekeepers to access the inner workings of the team and the players. As rugby union is a cultural-based sport where players will have grown up representing their local club, and hence their local community, there is a strong sense of pride and history, and also lots to talk about in terms of teams, matches, tournaments and of course players played with and against. This background in the sport was very helpful in the "getting to know" each other period in which I was attempting to immerse myself in the culture and build working alliances and relationships with the group.

Seeking to understand and acknowledge the nature of the high performance environment also presents numerous challenges for a SPC with regards to client confidentially and consent. Particularly, given that potential clients may range from the athletes themselves, through to

coaches, support staff and other employees (Anderson, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2001). At the outset of the initiation of my work with the organization I sought to clarify relationships with the various stakeholders regarding consent and how confidential information was shared (Stapleton, Hanks, Hayes, & Parham, 2001). Thereafter, I work continually with any clients to gain consensual agreement on what information can be shared among the layers of the organization (coach, manager, medical support staff, other players etc.). In both these circumstances a degree of contextual intelligence is required to understand how the organization works in relation to the various tiers of authority, line management and accountability that exist. Thereby alerting the SPC to understand whom the secondary clients may be in certain contexts. The use of checks and balances is particularly useful for the SPC here in helping establish who is my client? (Baltzell, Schinke, & Watson, 2010). For example, in my own practice I have a critical friend who is also practicing SPC in professional rugby union, that I share my SPC challenges with for discussion and consideration.

Reflections on Developing Contextual Intelligence and Cultural Competency

To conclude, in reflecting upon this paper it is evident that my appreciation of the cultural context of the sport of rugby union and how to practice as a SPC within it has derived from a number of sources. Firstly, in relation to what I have learnt or been "taught", my cultural competencies have developed through both my formal academic study into the social psychology of teams and the organizational psychology of high performance environments, together with the informal experiential knowledge gained through my ongoing reflections as a SPC across my career. In this respect I cannot overstate highly enough the value of engaging in reflective practice. Reflection is essential to allow practitioners to consider how they can apply their knowledge and skills to the specific context in which they are working to practice more effectively (Cropley, Hanton, Miles, & Niven, 2010). My own personal approach to reflection closely follows the model

of Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper (2001), whereby I seek to ask myself What? So what? Now what? in relation to my SPC practice experiences.

Second, an additional source to shaping my cultural competencies has been what I have "caught" through my life - my actual playing and coaching experiences within the sport itself, and growing up and residing in the country where the sport is played, and indeed the local area where the professional team I work with is based. Had I not caught these experiences through my natural upbringing then much of the cultural capital gained, which has allowed me to practice within rugby union, may not have existed. Indeed, had I come from a contrasting culture/country, played a different sport, or even been of different ethnicity or gender, there is no doubt my entire personal consulting philosophy developed for practicing in such a context would undoubtedly look very diverse to the one at present. This is not to say I may not have been any less effective with such a profile, but formal and informal taught learning processes aside, it is likely that the contextual intelligence and cultural competencies gained form those alternative life experiences I had caught would have also had a large impact on my practice, but in a far different way to my current approach.

Ensuring a practitioner possesses or develops sufficient contextual intelligence and cultural proficiency to work effectively in a particular environment given their own background experience and competencies is one of the most salient considerations for the training, supervision and ongoing development of the SPC. Drawing upon systems theory, Brown et al.'s (2005) framework for developing contextual intelligence suggests a successful intervention is one which is presented in the language of the client and also reflects their view of reality. Through the description of my own professional practice experiences in this paper I have sought to highlight some of my work which has attempted to achieve this goal.

Brown et al. (2005) have also described methods for learning the language of a performance domain by identifying the specific structure of the system, its patterns, inherent attitudes of its

members, and the various means of influence within the system or environment. Although not within the scope of the current paper it would clearly be beneficial to investigate and discuss the use of such methods in influencing effective sport psychology practice.

To conclude, I offer five general contextual considerations for practitioners intending to work effectively with athletes, teams and where appropriate, sport organizations, in a professional team sport such as rugby union:

1. Acknowledge the importance of culture - At the initiation and beginnings stage of the development of the support service the SPC should seek to begin developing cultural competency and contextual intelligence through awareness of the unique cultural factors and practices that may exist as barriers to developing working alliances for the provision of effective psychological support. These may include a lack of education/information about sport psychology practice and what a SPC is, and can do for an individual, team or organization (Pain & Harwood, 2004).
2. Learn the culture - The SPC should continue to build their cultural competency and contextual intelligence by familiarizing them self with the unique culture of the environment they are entering, such as the historical traditions, cultural artefacts and values of the team? What group dynamics currently exist overall and what is the natural environment within which the members of the organization are most comfortable? The SPC should seek to understand the language, both formal and informal, used within the unique culture of that organization or team, and the subsequent discourse and rhetoric in the way it is communicated among its members.
3. Immerse in the culture - When the SPCs begin working with the team or organization they are essentially a new member on the team roster or payroll, and should account for this accordingly, by building effective working relationships across the team/organization. Effective working alliances in professional team sports come from being appreciative of the bespoke organizational culture and being a fully integrated member of the support staff. This takes

investment of both time and effort, mirroring the commitment invested by the athletes (and support staff) themselves in the pursuit of excellence.

4. Work with the culture - When delivering intervention strategies, the SPC should adopt approaches that seek to consider the multifaceted elements that underpin the successful physical health and wellbeing of professional athletes and support staff. SPCs should seek to understand and use the best medium (e.g., direct/indirect) through which to build effective relationships with individuals and subsequently develop and deliver psychological based solutions within the organization. In particular, SPCs should be aware of the cultural constraints relating to the temporal, spatial, and delivery issues of their work (i.e., where? when? and how?).
5. Change with the culture - The nature of the service delivery the SPC undertakes with a client is transactional and requires an ongoing evaluation of the dynamic organizational culture within which the support service is provided. This support needs to adapt or change as the nature of the ongoing relationship with, and within the team or culture evolves and changes. The ability to engage in effective reflective practice is essential therefore to ensure the SPCs consider and locate themselves, and their actions in relation to these changing landscapes.

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